

Mitchell takes the road less travelled



By John Foley

IT'S 6.30am and you've been on the move non-stop for over 24 hours, cycling and running over hills and through valleys, kayaking and swimming across lakes and in flooded quarries. Now you're so tired that as you cycle your bike you begin to fall asleep. Your body can take no more and it's screaming out for rest, whether you like it or not.

"We had to pull in and just lie down on the ground for five minutes and we fell asleep on a bit of dirty grass. Just literally for five minutes and then you're ready to go again."

It might sound extreme but some people call it sport. Susie Mitchell is one of those people.

The event where sleep comes calling at inconvenient times is called the Beast of Ballyhoura, a 36-hour endurance test that is one of the many so-called adventure races that take place every year across the length and breadth of the country. Mitchell, from Oak Park in Carlow, has been competing for the past four years and has built a reputation as one of the toughest and most competitive racers on the circuit. The strange thing is, she fell into the sport almost by accident.

"About four years ago my husband, Cormac, decided he wanted to start this adventure racing and I knew nothing about it. So he entered us in a race up in Donegal. There are multiple disciplines involved like off-road running and mountain-biking and kayaking. Sometimes

you have to do something else like shooting or archery, depending on the race. You need to be a sort of jack of all trades which suits me because I would never have excelled at any sport. In school in St Leo's I did a few different sports and wasn't particularly good but when I combined them together I seemed to do much better, I found my niche."

That first race proved to be something of an eye opener.

"We ended up just getting completely lost in Glenveagh National Park and we thought at one stage that we'd have to call Search

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and Rescue. After about eight hours we finally made our way out of the mountains and got back. It was an absolutely brilliant experience and such a challenge to be out there on

your own bat, navigating around. I think we were second last in that race so that was our first taste of it."

Getting lost in national parks may have been a new experience but Susie and Cormac were already an active pair who thought nothing of heading off for a weekend of mountain-biking or hill-running, so introducing a competitive element was the next natural step to take where they would join fellow Carlow adventure enthusiasts like Hilary Jenkinson and Paul Mahon. From there it was feet first into a world of events like the Carlingford Lough Endurance Challenge.

"That course is only about 50k which doesn't sound too bad," Mitchell says without a hint of irony. "But all the biking and running is on mountainous terrain and it can take a long time to do some of the sections. You have to carry your bike for long distances and there's also a kayaking section. On that particular race I was out with two other girls, a team of three, so we won that race. But it was tough going at times."

It was in races like these that Mitchell found longer distances suited her. When others stated to wilt, she gained her second wind and was able to kick on for a few more hours. Interestingly, she noted a certain gender imbalance in the

numbers of those who were better able to push ahead.

"I find that I get better as time goes by, often it would hit maybe five hours into a race and I would be getting stronger while some of my teammates would be fading away - especially the guys. Maybe girls have better endurance. I seem to have a good engine and the longer stuff suits me."

The upside to putting yourself through this kind of endurance test is that you're frequently battling your way through some of the most rugged and beautiful landscape in the country.

"They take you right out into the wilderness and into parts of Ireland that you would never usually see," says Mitchell. "On something like Rás na Ríocht in Kerry, all the biking is mountain biking and it's quite technical. You're right out on the Kerry Way and at one stage you're on the edge of this sheer drop with fantastic views."

"That was one of the races I won. It was really nice because the kayaking section was in Canadian kayaks, two-person open kayaks. When you got to a transition point you had to wait until the next person arrived and kayak with them for four kilometers. It was really rugged, really wild and just fantastic."

Female competitors may have a

better ability to drive on over a long number of hours, but Mitchell says some girls can be discouraged by parts of the race experience.

"It's a pity there aren't more girls involved. It is increasing with the more popular races like Gaelforce [in Mayo]. There are more women involved and the standard is going up every year, but they're still reluctant to get onto the mountain bike. A lot of girls also get put off if they have to run over a bog and get muddy. Or if they have to run through a river, they think, "God, I can't do that!"

Running through a river and over bogs is the kind of test that sorts the true endurance athletes from the wannabes. It's also something that brings the competitors close together with a great sense of camaraderie on the circuit.

"A lot of our friends now are people we've met through the adventure racing scene," Mitchell says. "You get to know people very well and it can be the making and breaking of a friendship. You see people at their worst and at their best in that kind of environment."

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"Especially in the longer races,



Susie Mitchell in the colours of her track cycling team

Photo: John Courtney